

# K

## KANGAROO COURT

a court set up outside the regular legal system; staged trial where the outcome is set from the beginning

1. The rancher and his friends tried and convicted the horse thieves in a *kangaroo court* rather than let the sheriff take them to jail for a trial according to the law.
2. The political protesters had been tried and found guilty in a court of law, and when the verdict was read, they claimed that the jury and judge had not been impartial, and that they had been tried in a *kangaroo court*.

## KEEP (ONE'S) COOL

to stay calm under stress; not to become angry

1. I know you're angry, but you've got to try to control yourself. *Keep your cool* and don't lose your temper.
2. It's particularly important to *keep your cool* in a traffic jam. It's so easy to get angry and have an accident.

Synonym: *hold/lose (one's) temper*

Antonym: *lose (one's) cool; hot under the collar; see red*

## KEEP (ONE'S) EYES PEELED

to be alert and watchful; to look very carefully for something or someone

1. I'm looking for a special edition of a book, and I haven't found it anywhere. When you're in the bookstore, please *keep your eyes peeled* for it, will you?
2. They planned to meet Joe on a crowded corner at lunchtime. He hadn't arrived yet, but as people walked toward the corner, they *kept their eyes peeled* for him.

The expression suggests that one's eyelids are pulled back in order to not miss seeing anything.

## KEEP (ONE'S) FINGERS CROSSED

to hope for something; to wish for luck

1. Jane wasn't sure that she had passed the test, but she was *keeping her fingers crossed*.
2. They are *keeping their fingers crossed* that the rain holds off and doesn't spoil the picnic they have planned.

The expression probably originates from a superstition that bad luck can be prevented by crossing one's fingers. The expression refers to crossing one's middle finger over the knuckle of the index finger.

## KEEP (ONE'S) HEAD ABOVE WATER

to just barely manage to stay ahead, financially (sentence 1) or with one's work or responsibilities (sentence 2)

1. Mrs. Robinson has three children to support and she doesn't make very much money at her job. She is barely *keeping her head above water*.
2. Peter is having a difficult time at the university because he wasn't very well prepared academically, but he is somehow managing to *keep his head above water*.

Antonym: *in over (one's) head*

Compare to: *make ends meet; get by*

*Keep one's head above water* and *make ends meet* mean having just enough money but no extra, although the former conveys a greater feeling of desperation. *Keep one's head above water* can mean survival in a financial or other sense, whereas *make ends meet* always refers to a financial situation.

## KEEP (ONE'S) NOSE TO THE GRINDSTONE

to work hard without rest

1. You will succeed if you keep working hard, but you have to *keep your nose to the grindstone*.
2. Kim is studying constantly now because she has final exams next week. She's in her room *keeping her nose to the grindstone*.

The expression usually refers to monotonous work.

## KEEP (ONE'S) SHIRT ON

to stay calm or be patient when someone wants to hurry

1. Will you *keep your shirt on*, Bob? You won't get there any faster if you drive too fast and cause a car accident.
2. I know you're hungry, but dinner won't be ready for another ten minutes. Just *keep your shirt on*!

Synonym: *hold (one's) horses*

Antonyms: *shake a leg; step on it*

The expression is generally used in the imperative. It is used by an adult to children, a superior to a subordinate, or between two equals on friendly or intimate terms.

## KEEP (ONE'S) WITS ABOUT (ONE)

to pay attention and be ready to react

1. If she wants to do well in her job interview, she can't daydream—she'll have to *keep her wits about her*.
2. When I travel, I'm always careful to keep my things with me in crowded places. I *keep my wits about me*.

Compare to: *at (one's) wits' end; scared out of (one's) wits*

## KEEP (SOMEONE) AT ARM'S LENGTH

to keep someone at a distance emotionally

1. You can't expect people to be very friendly to you when you always *keep them at arm's length*.
2. Craig thinks that if he *keeps everyone at arm's length*, he won't fall in love and get hurt.

## KEEP (SOMETHING) UNDER (ONE'S) HAT

to keep something secret

1. Don't tell Richard anything you don't want everyone else to know. It's impossible for him to *keep anything under his hat*.
2. I'm not telling anyone yet, but Tom and I are getting married. *Keep it under your hat*, okay?

Antonyms: *spill the beans*; *let the cat out of the bag*

This phrase originates from the 1800s, when many men and women wore hats. The idea is to keep a secret in your head, underneath a hat.

## KEEP THE BALL ROLLING

to maintain momentum; to keep some process going

1. The principal has done so much and worked so hard to improve this school. Who's going to *keep the ball rolling* when she retires?
2. Mr. Preston had managed to motivate his employees to higher production levels, and he wanted to keep them going. He wondered how he could *keep the ball rolling*.

## KEEP UP WITH THE JONESES

to have the same standard of living as one's friends and neighbors do

1. My wife seems to think that we should buy our children cars of their own just because most of our friends do. She seems to think we have to *keep up with the Joneses*.
2. *Keeping up with the Joneses* can be very expensive. Every time your neighbor improves his home or buys a new car, you feel you have to, too.

The expression implies that one strains one's financial resources when one tries to match or exceed the purchases or actions made by a neighbor.

Jones is a common family name.

## KEYED UP

full of nervous anticipation; anxious; tense

1. Stop pacing the floor. Relax. Why are you *so keyed up*?
2. Charles was *so keyed up* waiting for the wedding to begin that when it finally did, he dropped the wedding ring.

## KICK THE BUCKET

to die

1. I plan on spending all my money before I *kick the bucket*. I'm not going to leave a penny of it to my relatives.
2. Your father hasn't yet made a will. He doesn't plan on *kicking the bucket* anytime soon.
3. The old woman was a person everyone in the neighborhood disliked. There were not too many mourners when she *kicked the bucket*.

The expression can be either disparaging or light-hearted when used about oneself or one's relatives (sentences 1 and 2), or disrespectful and impolite when used about someone else (sentence 3).

## KICK UP (ONE'S) HEELS

to have a lively and fun time, usually at a party or dance

1. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor are certainly having a good time at the party. They haven't *kicked up their heels* like this for years.
2. Put down your work, get out of the house, and come to the dance. Why don't you *kick up your heels* for a change?

The expression is commonly used to describe someone who is ordinarily quiet and reserved and for whom having a lively time is unusual.

## KILL TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

to accomplish two objectives with one action

1. I have to go to New York on business this Friday, and I've needed to get some new suits for some time. Maybe I can *kill two birds with one stone*: I'll attend to my business in New York on Friday and Monday and do some shopping over the weekend.
2. I need to get rid of all the old baby clothes I had for my children when they were small. Since you are about to have your first baby, why don't I give the clothes to you? We'll *kill two birds with one stone*.

## KNEE-HIGH TO A GRASSHOPPER

very young

1. I was just *knee-high to a grasshopper* when I first went fishing with my father. I couldn't have been more than five years old.
2. Look how small these pants are! I must have been *knee-high to a grasshopper* the last time I wore them.

The expression suggests that the person is only as tall as a grasshopper's knee and is therefore very young. It is often used with a facedown, open hand to indicate the young person's height at the time.

## **KNOCK/THROW (SOMEONE) FOR A LOOP [KNOCKED/THROWN FOR A LOOP]**

to shock, surprise, or astound someone

1. The teacher *threw me for a loop* when she told me I had failed the exam. I thought I had done so well.
2. Alan was *knocked for a loop* when he found out he had won \$5,000 in the lottery.

Compare to: *pull the rug out from under (someone); spring something on (someone)*

## **KNOW BEANS ABOUT SOMETHING, NOT**

to know very little about something; to speak without authority on some topic

1. Rita's interpretation of that artist is completely wrong. Don't listen to her. She *doesn't know beans about it*.
2. Sometimes you go on and on as though you're an expert. I bet you *don't know beans about* half the things you think you do.

Similar to: *talk through one's hat*

## **KNOW IF (ONE) IS COMING OR GOING, NOT to be confused and disoriented**

1. Nancy thought yesterday was Wednesday and now she thinks today is Sunday. She *doesn't know if she's coming or going*.
2. First I packed all the wrong clothes, then left the bag behind, and waited for the taxi until I realized I had forgotten to call one. When it came, I couldn't remember where I wanted to go. I don't *know if I'm coming or going*.

Antonyms: *on the ball; get/have (one's) act together*

Compare to: *out to lunch*

## **KNOW (SOMEONE) FROM ADAM, NOT**

to be unable to recognize someone because the person is a stranger

1. Who is that speaking at the podium? Is it the chairman? I don't *know him from Adam*.
2. A strange woman approached us at the train station. I assumed that she was Mrs. Smith, whom we were supposed to meet, but it was hard to tell since we didn't *know Mrs. Smith from Adam*.

## **KNOW THE INS AND OUTS**

to be familiar with the details and hidden meanings of an activity or situation

1. When you travel to a foreign country, it is wise to hire a guide if you don't *know the ins and outs* of the place.
2. American businesses often hire host country nationals to help them do business in foreign countries because the host country nationals *know the ins and outs* of doing business with their own countrymen.

Compare to: *know the ropes*

*Know the ropes* is more frequently used to describe knowing the procedures to follow in a situation (knowing how to do something), whereas *know the ins and outs* more often describes the complex and hidden details of a situation.

## **KNOW THE ROPES**

to be familiar with a task or situation

1. Let Marilyn help you get the manuscript published the first time. She *knows the ropes* and she'll save you a lot of time and effort.
2. You have to *know the ropes* if you want to get hired in this city. Employers are looking for people with connections and know-how, not untried youngsters fresh out of college.

Antonym: *wet behind the ears*

Compare to: *learn the ropes; know the ins and outs*

*Know the ropes* is more frequently used to describe knowing the procedures to follow in a given situation (how to do something), whereas *ins and outs* more often describes the complex and hidden details of a situation.

## **KNUCKLE DOWN**

to do one's work seriously; to apply oneself fully; to get busy

1. The young man hadn't been studying very much and now he was failing his courses. The student advisor told him he would have to *knuckle down* if he wanted to avoid being expelled.
2. Mary frequently complains that she doesn't have enough time to finish her work. But if she would spend less time chatting and just *knuckle down*, she would get it done.

## **KNUCKLE UNDER**

to submit or give in to pressure

1. Don't let society beat you down or make you be the way everyone else is. Don't *knuckle under*.
2. The mob leader promised that they would never make him reveal his partners in crime, no matter how badly they treated him. He swore he would never *knuckle under*.

Antonyms: *stand (one's) ground; stick to (one's) guns*